



## On Teaching, Tirades and Ted Greene

by Bill Cooley

This month's article isn't about what's happening in Nashville, but rather about taking a bit of Nashville to Boston. In late September, Kathy Mattea and I did a week-long residency at the Berklee College of Music. Usually, Pat Pattison's songwriting class at Berklee takes an annual field trip to Nashville to learn from working professionals. This time we had a chance to go up there and interact with the students. Among the activities scheduled for us, Kathy gave a vocal clinic, I gave a guitar clinic and we both sat-in with a country music ensemble. We also talked to a music production class and played demos of songs selected for Kathy's new album, *Right Out of Nowhere*; then we played the final CD versions and described the process we used to arrange and record the finished

product.

The big project for the week, however, was Kathy's proposal to select a student song on Monday and record it on Friday. We were both amazed as we entered a classroom Monday night to find it crammed with students armed with their demos. We listened to over 40 entries and were very impressed with the quality of the songs- not just a lot of frivolous stuff, but thoughtful ideas on big issues. These kids are deep! Towards the end, while listening to a song about a mother comforting her child after a hurricane, Kathy burst into tears. We had our song. The next day Kathy and I got together and found a key for her and did some arranging. The demo was presented as a piano ballad but I gave it a gentle acoustic guitar groove that suited Kathy's voice better and allowed it to be more of a band track, since the idea was to fill out the session with student players.



On Friday, we recorded the song, "A Matter of Time," at the school's studio with none other than Elliot Sheiner (Eagles, Steely Dan) engineering and George Massenburg (Little Feat, Linda Ronstadt) producing. Elliot and George were at Berklee that same week doing their own residencies in the school's recording dept. I arrived at 10 a.m. along with the rest of the band, made up of student musicians on drums, fretless electric bass, piano and Celtic (gut-string) Harp, to get sounds and levels before Kathy arrived.

Elliot and George had their recording students mic up each instrument. When Elliot returned to the control room, George came around and

critiqued each student's decision. He did not treat them with kid gloves. His manner was tough, his tone impatient and his voice loud enough for everyone down the hall to hear. He questioned their choice and placement of microphones and let them know immediately what he did or didn't like.

When Kathy arrived at noon and we started recording takes, George treated the student band the same way, yelling at them when he felt the song was losing its groove or if he heard a wrong note go by. Frankly, his tirades shocked me a little. He told me later he's purposely rough on 'em; if they can survive this they can survive any studio situation. When I commented to the bass player how well he was doing under the pressure, he smiled and said they were kinda used to it. Apparently it wasn't George's first session at Berklee. And I must say the students I met that week seemed so fearless, so willing to put themselves on the line to learn something. It was inspiring to be around so many young musicians hungry and passionate for music.

As for me, I've never been so focused on a session in my life! I was supposed to be the experienced pro but I knew I was only one clam away from George's wrath - so I didn't make any! Around 3:30, after filling up three reels of 2" analog tape, George finally pronounced, "There's your master take."

It was an intense, grueling session but I also have to say George Massenburg clearly demonstrated his brilliance. His reputation for having the biggest ears in the business is deserved. Nothing got by him - he heard everything and never seem to lose his concentration as he kept track of countless technical and performance details. Elliot was the consummate pro, relentlessly working on great sounds and then making sure they stayed consistent take to take.

I heard both Elliot and George giving the students great advice. Elliot demonstrated how to baffle instruments in the same room to provide necessary isolation while maintaining a live tracking feel. For example, George told the drummer to establish the song's groove for several measures before counting it off in order to solidify the intro. It truly was an invaluable experience for those students; the only way to gain confidence in the studio is to occasionally experience days like that.



On the complete flip-side of the teaching spectrum, I was saddened to learn of the death of Ted Greene. Ted was an L.A. guitar legend. He was a quiet, gentle soul with towering musical talent. Hearing him play moved me like few others have. In 1979, I took three lessons from him. He opened my ears to a whole new way of hearing chords. I'm still working on what he gave me, still finding inspiration in his lessons and in his books. His solo guitar arrangements, with their perfect voice leading and one-of-a-kind chords, were often composed on the spot as he would play through a standard several times, each chorus modulating to a new key with a different feel. I was lucky enough to hear this shy and reluctant performer play in public once and watched how his beautiful touch and tone mesmerized a bar full of businessmen at a Friday happy hour. By the end of the second song, you could hear a pin drop.

George and Ted represented two very different teaching styles- one noisy and confrontational, the other quiet and composed. Sometimes you're motivated by being yelled at, sometimes by inspired humility. It's possible to learn from both.

Until next time,  
Bill Cooley